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ABSTRACT

The portfolio approach to teaching writing brings the writing process into the classroom and enables the new teacher--and all teachers--to see writing from a new perspective, to truly be collaborators and coaches with their students. A college writing teacher uses portfolios and plays the role of evaluator as well as the responder in three courses she teaches: first-year college composition, upper-division writing, and graduate writing. In none of these classes does the teacher find the grading burdensome. The biggest advantage of using portfolios for teaching and evaluating student writing may be that the processes of writing are made more evident. In addition to foregrounding revision as part of writing, the whole act of preparing portfolios reveals other essential parts of the process: the relationship between assignments and revisions, the influence of readers on what is written, the elements of helpful criticism, and the struggle to conceptualize aspects of the occasion for writing. New teachers can observe first-hand how varied are the processes of writing. There are advantages of portfolio grading for writing teachers--new composition teachers as well as the experienced. (RS)

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PORTFOLIOS FOR NEW (AND EXPERIENCED) TEACHERS OF WRITING

Portfolios in classroom practice are a representative collection of student writing over a period of time. As such, they are evidence of the evolution and improvement that each student's writing has undergone from beginning to end. They represent all the instruction, collaboration, vexations, and emergent insights that each writer has experienced. Moreover, they reflect writing as many people do it outside of school: getting an idea, exploring it, discussing it with others, writing it down and developing it, discussing it with others, revising it, having it reviewed by peers, revising it, and finally, perhaps, publishing it to a broader audience. A student portfolio usually contains several pieces of finished writing along with drafts, responses from peers and teacher, and perhaps acknowledgment of assistance and a table of contents.

For the writing classroom, portfolios are a natural--so logical that we wonder what took us so long to borrow the idea from art, photography, creative writing, and other disciplines where portfolios have long been the means for representing one's work. The ways portfolios benefit students and programs have been discussed at length by Elbow, Belanoff, Dickson, Yancey and others. What I propose to do here is propose some advantages of portfolio grading for teachers--new composition teachers as well as the experienced.

To provide a context for my ideas, as well as a demonstration of the flexibility of

what we loosely refer to as "the portfolio system," I first describe my use of portfolios in three different courses. In all three courses--first-year college composition, upper-division writing, and graduate writing--the teacher is the evaluator as well as the responder.

In the freshman course, I collect portfolios twice, once at midterm and again at the end of the term. Each portfolio contains the usual: revised papers, drafts, prewritings, peer responses, teacher responses, conference notes and scribblings, and a cover memo stating the contents and reflecting on the portfolio preparation process. Each revised paper has been reviewed by peers, submitted once for teacher response (but not graded), and considered at an individual conference with the teacher. The papers in the portfolio are then graded according to how well they meet departmental standards.

I continue to use third person in describing this course, because this is the plan I advise teaching assistants to use. Despite Yancey's advice in Portfolios in the Writing Classroom that teachers' decision to use writing portfolios be voluntary, I see some benefit (as I will explain later) in strongly suggesting--if not requiring--that beginning teaching assistants organize their courses around the portfolio system. This is the plan I give them a sample syllabus for. This is the plan we discuss on assignments and evaluation. It's the one I recommend in the Handbook for Teaching Assistants and Faculty that I prepare each year. But I am open; TAs can organize their courses differently if they want to. And after their first term of teaching some do adopt other systems of grading that allow for revision after teacher response.

My upper-division writing course is organized a little differently, though it still utilizes portfolios. Here I take up portfolios only once--at the end of the term, when I

require three finished papers together with all earlier drafts. This course is patterned more like the one Kathy McClelland describes in "Portfolios: Solution to a Problem." There are no assignments. The main goal is mature writers. So students struggle for a while with subjects, purposes, and occasions for writing. When a student continues to hopelessly cast around for an idea, I might hold an impromptu mini-conference about the student's interests. In one such conference the last time I taught the course, one young man suddenly realized he had a great deal to say about the theater--that was after talking all term about his experiences as stage manager for the campus theater but still thinking he didn't have anything to write about. The same student later wrote a powerful essay about facing his homosexuality. In this course, students need to learn that they have something to say. Throughout the quarter, I respond to drafts whenever students submit them, writing on my computer and keeping a running copy of my responses. To forestall the inevitable procrastination, I also require weekly memos to update me on progress. Surprisingly, these students don't get too nervous about having grades delayed. And not surprisingly, the reading load is manageable because, except at the end of the term, I never have a class-size stack of papers. Even at the end of the term, the load is manageable because of the finished quality of most of the papers.

Finally, I use portfolios in my graduate writing course. The students in this course are cross-disciplinary--completing masters' theses or papers, or preparing papers for journal publication. In addition to regular graduate students, I sometimes have faculty and administrators in the course, usually working toward publication. Here, each student writes his or her own syllabus--or contract--detailing what work will be completed and at what stages feedback from me or the class will be requested. Throughout the term, students read

their work in class--usually to the entire class (they become a genuine discourse community, dependent on and respectful of one another). As in the upper-division course, I respond to drafts on a computer printout and keep a running copy for myself. The portfolio at the end of the course contains the work we agreed upon in the contract, and the grade depends on the quality of the work and the degree to which the student has met the contract.

In no class do I find the grading burdensome--a sometimes expressed complaint about portfolios. In fact, for me it's uplifting to respond to what a student has written without having to evaluate it. I see this as one of the primary benefits of portfolios--one often cited. Separating the formative response from the summative, the gatekeeper role from that of coach, the teacher from the evaluator all together make the reading much easier. Portfolios enable teachers to be teachers, not just evaluators. And this is a heady experience--why we're in the business of teaching writing--to use what we know about writing to enable others to become better at it--not just to tell them how well they measure up. That's the main reason I recommend portfolios to new teachers. They learn from the beginning that teaching writing is a type of coaching, a type of advising, a conversation, a journey together--and not a power trip of assigning work and handing down grades. By delaying evaluation, new teachers learn first to be teachers.

But there are other reasons for new and experienced teachers to use portfolios. Let me talk around one. My ideas are still tentative, hypothetical, but they're based on one of the main reasons we are so excited about using portfolios. I'm not expressing a new idea when I say that the biggest advantage of using portfolios for teaching and evaluating student writing may be that the processes of writing are made more evident. Not only do portfolios fit most

comfortably into the process of writing, but they also bring those processes out into the open. For new teachers who may be thinking in terms of products--worrying about how to get them and how to respond to them--the demonstration of writing process is a revelation. I'm building on Burnham's statement that "Portfolio evaluation reinforces a program's commitment to the teaching of writing as a process involving multiple drafting, and emphasizes the need for revision" (136). Especially in the course where no assignments are made, the kind of revision that is characteristic of experienced writers--the kind that occurs during planning and drafting, the kind that is so difficult to teach--is more likely to occur as students bring in tentative beginnings of drafts, drafts up to the point where the muse dried up, or just ideas for drafts. Here they discuss what they are trying to do, what problems they are having, what kind of feedback they need. And they take the drafts away, work on them some more, and bring them back. Revising is part of the composing process, not an activity imposed at the end. The "atonceness" (Ann Berthoff's term) of composing is nowhere more evident.

In addition to foregrounding revision as part of writing, the whole act of preparing portfolios reveals other essential parts of the process: the relationship between assignments and revisions, the influence of readers on what is written, the elements of helpful criticism, and the struggle to conceptualize aspects of the occasion for writing. New writing teachers need this evidence.

Moreover, new teachers who may have observed no other writing than their own can observe first-hand how varied are the processes of writing--varied by individual, rhetorical context, and requirements of the assignment. Because of the built-in, foregrounded revision, teachers discover the differences in how writers revise. Narratives, for example, may be

revised differently from exposition. Perhaps they are revised differently, as Arthur Applebee speculates in his RTE "Musings," because the form of the narrative is relatively routine but content needs adjustment whereas in exposition the form may be a challenge but the content is relatively fixed. Teachers may even question whether there is always a need for revision. If we ask students to perform familiar tasks, do they need to revise? Or do they perceive the task as familiar and therefore can think of no way to make it better?

When we assign writing of a type that is relatively familiar in format or content, perhaps there isn't much to revise. Ask yourself how much you revise memos, personal letters, responses to student writing. Do you correct your typos? adjust your format? revise a phrase or two? Maybe you adjust the content a little--add something, delete something--but you probably don't do much of that when you know both the form and content well. What would you do with a report or proposal if your department chair sent it back telling you to "add more details"? Or to make your introduction more interesting? Or to rearrange your major points? I can just imagine what you would do with such suggestions; you were convinced on completing the routine report that it was already as complete and coherent as it was ever going to be. On the other hand, when you write something speculative, reflective, or exploratory, you probably find it helpful to have someone respond with "Have you considered X?" Or "Why not start out . . . ? We welcome such help--we seek it out--because we don't know for sure what we want to say anyway.

Isn't this true of school writing assignments? If students don't know how to revise, it may help if we analyze the task--something new teachers (and any of us) may forget to do. If the content and form are relatively fixed, and the writer has covered the subject rather

completely, suggestions for revision might draw attention to form and style--perhaps also with the way the writer handles the facts and reactions to them. But if the essay is exploratory, the writer will probably welcome ideas and new avenues of exploration. If the essay is reflective, it may yet be mainly writer-based and need some reader-based revisions. All these aspects of writing might be overlooked by the teacher and be disregarded by the student when we respond and grade essay by essay. Our comments on the shortcomings of a reflective essay may not apply to the drafting of the expository essay. And if the reflective essay has already been graded--completed--there is no reason to apply the comments to it either.

Usually peer review is included in the portfolio process. It's used in other methods of organizing the classroom too, but with the portfolio the circle is more complete--because it includes the teacher too. Peers and teacher alike are part of an audience that responds to essays in process. Because the grading is not immediate, students, it seems, are more ready to become real readers rather than spell-checkers helping a peer to get a better grade on a paper. Teachers usually find themselves in the position of agreeing with student readers and, thus, as part of the process become more sensitive to the needs of both readers and writers. Because grading is delayed, teachers can respond as informed readers--much as your colleagues might review your manuscripts. New teachers learn how to read--learning what to look for, discovering what is missing, becoming sensitive to uncalled for shifts in tone, training themselves to recognize and acknowledge their own unanswered questions.

And how comforting to learn all this when we don't have to justify a grade. And let's face it, when any of us evaluate an essay--telling a student it's worth an A, a B, a C, or

whatever--our comments justify (explain) that grade. This is the nature of summative comments: telling the writer how the writing measures up to expectations. But teachers need to learn the formative response first--because we are teachers. It's our job to make better writers--to assist them in the formative stages of becoming better writers. And that requires that we become expert readers.

As we become expert, we learn what kind of criticism to give. As a writer, I have received a great deal of criticism. That's OK. I ask for it. I need it. It tells me where my writing hits the mark and where it doesn't, where it's especially insightful and where it borders on banal. Criticism is helpful, because it puts me in touch with my readers. But criticism that is totally negative, that tries to make my writing into something I never intended, is detrimental. It's counterproductive, because it gives me no direction except to toss out what I've written and start over on someone else's idea. Totally negative, make-it-over criticism gives a writer no place to go.

Teacher-readers, too, need to allow the writer his or her donnee, or given, and try to avoid appropriating the writing. Revision, after all, can be done only by the writer, because only the writer knows what he or she meant to say. The rest of us can only make suggestions based on our reading (or misreading) of the text. Of course, students--and all writers--don't always have their own choice of genre, purpose, subject, or audience--the whole rhetorical situation. So teachers learn to respond not only to the writer's premise but to the exigencies of the situation as well--exigencies that may require reflective essays to remain fundamentally reflective even though they may take a persuasive turn, or persuasion to be supported by evidence. Evidence itself has certain exigencies; it must be compelling and

based on an authority that readers will accept. Again, the absence of the pressure of evaluation and justifying a grade allows a new teacher to consider what might be needed and how those needs might be achieved.

Students--and teachers as well--are not always able to conceptualize aspects of the occasion for writing: what readers might know or expect, what tone is appropriate, how the writer can build credibility, and so on. But in the preparation of portfolios--including peer input, workshoping conferences, and teacher response--talk becomes part of the writing process. In this period of incubation (borrowing James Britton's term), talk brings to the foreground exploration, clarification, interpretation, differences of opinion, explanation, and more. Students wanting to "get it right" (borrowing from Britton again) relate to their audience. They learn to "satisfy the reader" as well as satisfying themselves (47). Teachers too, perhaps using an assignment for the first time, can't anticipate what skills and tasks the assignment requires, what problems might occur. But by spreading out the process, providing for peer exploration and questioning as well as revision before grading, they can often discover the limitations--plus, perhaps, serendipitous achievements--of their assignments.

The portfolio approach to teaching writing, as has been said by many of us who use it, brings the writing process into the classroom. By doing so, it enables the new teacher--and all teachers--to see writing from a new perspective, to truly be collaborators and coaches with our students. That's reason enough to recommend it.

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